AS LONG AS I LIVE
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 146
Romans 5:1–8

"I will praise the Lord as long as I live."
Psalm 146:2 (NRSV)

He who is satisfied has never truly craved,
and he who craves for the light of God
neglects his ease for ardor,
his life for love,
knowing that contentment is the shadow
not the light.
The great yearning that sweeps eternity
is a yearning to praise . . .
And when the waves of that yearning swell in our souls
all the barriers are pushed aside . . .

I did not ask for success; I asked
for wonder. And you gave it to me.

Abraham Joshua Heschel
I Asked for Wonder

David James Duncan tells a story about being kicked out of his church one day when he was twelve.

He and a group of his friends had sneaked into the sanctuary of his church, and he was entertaining them by playing the Ramsey Lewis version of "Hang on Sloopy" on the church's big grand piano. They were caught—by a man Duncan describes as "veiny with rage." I can almost see him, can't you?

"This is God's house!" the man roared in Duncan's face.

"That was Ramsey Lewis's music," Duncan peeped in reply.

"Get out!" the man bellowed, seizing the boy by the scruff of his collar.

"OK," Duncan said, and he left—and hasn't been back since (*God Laughs and Plays,* pp. 10–11).

That story, which is vaguely familiar to me and perhaps to many of you, is how Duncan begins a provocative little book, *God Laughs and Plays*, which he calls a collection of "Churchless Sermons." The essays—"churchless sermons"—are irreverent, honest, sometimes over the top, provocative, and funny. He remembers his earliest experience with religion and the questions he found himself asking even as a child.

"I was born a chosen person, though this state of affairs was not of my choosing," he remembers and explains that his mother, grandmother, and great grandmother were staunch members of an "apocalypse-preaching, fundamentalist sect" that had first predicted the second coming of Jesus and the rapture in the 1840s. When it didn't happen, the leaders of the movement organized a church.

"These strong women gave their offspring no choice but to attend these same churches and share their faith, so attend and share we did."

His father and grandfather, however, did not, nor did any of his friends at school. He and the other members of his church were "saved," he explains; "no plagues of boils and frogs or eternal hellfire for me—whereas my father, grandfather, and school friends were, according to our preachers, impending toast."

"Sound suspicious to you?" he asks and then comments,

> It sure did to me. Intense spiritual feelings were frequent visitors during my boyhood, but they did not come from church-going or from bargaining with God through prayer. The connection I felt to the Creator came, unmediated, from the Creation itself. The spontaneous gratitude I felt for birds and birdsong, tree-covered or snow-capped mountains, rivers and their trout, moon and starlight, summer winds on wilderness lakes became the spiritual instructors of my boyhood. . . . [In nature] I felt linked to powers and mysteries I could sincerely imagine calling the Presence of God.

Duncan's point and argument is that we have an innate sense of wonder and awe in us, an innate sense of God, if you will. And what blocks it, knocks it out of us, ironically, oftentimes is religion. Institutional religion, in his experience, doesn't have much room for wonder in it, but it does have a lot of certainty.

He writes, "In fifteen years of churchgoing I did not once feel this same sense of Presence" that he did in nature. "What I felt instead was a lot of heavily-agenda-ed, fear-based information being shoved at me by men on the church payroll. Though these men claimed to speak for God, I was never

convinced. So on the day I was granted the option of what our preachers called 'leaving the faith,' I left and increased my faith by so doing" (Preface).

My guess is that a lot of us have had experiences something like that. My guess is that there are a lot of people who see the church and formal, organized religion as an impediment to their own spirituality.

The author goes on to argue that religious fundamentalism, any religious fundamentalism, with its "One True Book, One True Set of Beliefs," absolute certainty about God's will and who finally wins God's approval and therefore a place in God's paradise, is ultimately dangerous, responsible for a fair amount of the world's troubles and our own culture's fractiousness.

He also proposes that God has a better sense of humor and compassion than many of God's self-appointed spokespersons do. That is to say, God does laugh and play.

Over against that prevailing sense of heaviness that characterizes a lot of religion, the ponderous piety, rules upon rules and the absolute certainty that we are right and everyone else is wrong, stands the Bible, particularly the psalms. In the psalms, the purpose of religion is to praise God. In the psalms, the object of the whole enterprise is to bring us to such an awareness of the goodness and grace and mystery of creation that we're left in a state of awe and wonder with little to say but thank you.

The Psalter ends with a collection someone calls a "crescendo of praise":

> Praise the Lord!
> Praise the Lord, O my Soul!
> I will praise the Lord as long as I live.
> I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

In a graceful paraphrase of Psalm 146, Stephen Mitchell puts it,

> I praise the Lord with my whole heart: with each living breath I sing to my God.

And concludes,

> Praise him for what you can fathom: for what you cannot fathom, praise him.

Religion here, in the 146th Psalm, is not about believing ideas about God to be true, but about praising and thanking God; it is not about theological certainty, but wonder and awe, laughter and rejoicing and silent reverence.

Poets join the psalmists here.

> Gerard Manley Hopkins: “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.”

And Walt Whitman: my theology professor, the late Joseph Sittler, couldn’t deliver a lecture without somewhere working in some lines from Whitman. Whitman, who served as a nurse during the Civil War, was always looking at the world—the simple, mundane, ordinary things of the world and our life in it—with the wonder of a child:

> I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand not in the least. . . .
> I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four and each moment of them. . . .
> I find letters from God dropt in the street, and every one is signed by his name.
> (*Twenty Poems to Nourish Your Soul,* Judith Valente and Charles Reynard, ed.)

It is the job of the poets to remind us of the profound holiness of the ordinary stuff of life, the presence of God at the heart of things. And one of the fascinating developments of our time is that science, conventionally regarded as the enemy of religion, with its rational, relentlessly logical methodology, is now, for many at least, an ally.

Stephen Hawking, the British cosmologist and authority on black holes and gravity, wrote *A Brief History of Time,* which points to the deep, unexplainable mystery behind our existence. I think Hawking is fascinating —inspiring, actually. Hawking lives with ALS and has been confined for years to a wheelchair, has continued to work and study and explore. He’s a father and grandfather, has visited the White House and Great Wall of China, the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders, and has been lowered deep into the heart of an underground accelerator. Now he’s preparing to go into space. The *New York Times* commented, “The image of him floating through the stars in his wheelchair has become a symbol of humanity’s restless curiosity and wonder” (“Stephen Hawking Plans Prelude to the Ride of His Life,” 1 March 2007).

There’s a new biography of Albert Einstein by Walter Isaacson, which deals with Einstein’s faith. Asked all his life whether he believed in God, the great scientist one time said, “Yes. . . . Try and penetrate with our limited means the secrets of nature and you will find, behind all the discernible laws and connections, something subtle, intangible, and inexplicable. Veneration for that force, beyond anything we can comprehend, is my religion.”

One time Einstein composed his personal credo in words that have become famous. “The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mysterious,” he wrote.

> It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand in rapt awe, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle. To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is something that our minds cannot grasp, whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly, this is religiousness. In this sense I am a devoutly religious man.
> (See “Einstein and Faith,” *Time*, 6 April 2007)

Religion begins, as life does, in awe and wonder. To witness human birth, to hold in your arms a newborn, just moments after drawing a first breath, newly alive, fingers and toes, eyes and ears, the miraculous processes of seeing and hearing beginning to work, tiny heart and lungs functioning—life, new human life—is to be in the presence of the Holy. The great theologian-philosopher Paul Tillich said that basic wonder—he called it ontological—wonder happens when we ponder the fact that there is something rather than nothing. “Viewed from the standpoint of nonbeing, being is a mystery,” Tillich said. And I never understood what that meant until I held a newborn in my arms and experienced the wonder that something exists that didn’t exist before. An ob/gyn friend, who in his career delivered literally thousands of babies, told me once that it never ceased to amaze him, that it was always a personal epiphany, an experience of God.

And to experience death, to be present when a last breath is drawn and life ends, is, equally, to be in the presence of a mystery beyond our understanding. It is also to stand in awe and wonder at the amazing miracle of human life.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, philosopher, social activist, theologian, and rabbi, was one of the most influential religious thinkers of our time. Several years before he died, he suffered a near-fatal heart attack. A friend came to visit and found the great man weak and pale, speaking slowly, almost in a whisper. “Sam,” he said, “when I regained consciousness, my first feelings were not of despair and anger. I felt only gratitude to God for my life, for every moment. I have seen so many miracles. I prayed the old Yiddish prayer: ‘I did not ask for success; I asked for wonder. And you gave it to me’” (*I Asked for Wonder*, Introduction, Samuel H. Dresner, ed).

For Christians, the heart of the matter is God’s love, which we experience in creation, in the miracle of human life, and fundamentally in Jesus Christ.

And it begins not with rational explanation or theological argument; it begins in silent reverence, wonder—at the mystery of the world and our lives in it, the creative power beyond our ability to understand intellectually and which will not be reduced to creeds or theological propositions. “Two wonders I confess,” the old hymn puts it: “The wonder of redeeming love and my unworthiness.”

And so Jesus, as he faced his own death, on the very night of his arrest, the night before he died, wanting to tell his friends how deeply he loved them, how his love was God’s love, how if they simply looked around at the world they would know that the world is full of God’s grandeur and love, did the most extraordinary thing: took two items from ordinary life—daily bread, daily wine—and said:

> This is my body for you.
> This is my blood for you.

This is the mystery of God’s love for the world and everything in it; this is the mystery and miracle of God’s presence in the common, everyday stuff of life. This bread and this wine is a reminder that God is present at every table, in every meal: bread and wine, wheat, fruit, in the grandeur of nature and the birth of a child, a reminder of God’s presence in every day of our lives.

> This is my body for you.
> This is my blood for you.
> The mystery of God’s love for you.
> Eat, drink, and remember
> the love of God for you.

I will praise the Lord as long as I live. Amen.